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CHAPTER 22

Communicating Good Luck During the Chinese New Year

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In the city of Long Beach, California, in the early 1970s we were the only Chinese family in a predominantly Euro-American community. At the age of 10, I experienced reverse cultural shock when my family moved to Chinatown in Los Angeles. I had never before socialized with other Chinese girls and boys, and although I was a Chinese American I felt different from them. I did not know what being Chinese really was. On the other hand, I always knew I was Chinese and different in some respects from my classmates when I lived in Euro-American-dominated Long Beach.

Before long I developed friendships with my Chinese peers who welcomed me into their group.

rec [One 10-year-old girl among them advised me on do's and don'ts during their celebration of the Chinese New Year. "Don't wash your hair on New Year's Day," she told me.

"Why?" I asked.

"It makes you look like a white lady, a white ghost. It's bad luck. Also, we don't clean our house, throw out trash, or sweep the floor on Chinese New Year's Day. It's bad luck. It's like throwing or sweeping your money away."

As a little girl, this brief conversation struck me as odd and intriguing. Reflecting today, however, I'm fascinated at how culturally rich this interaction was. This essay offers an insider's view of how the Chinese New Year holiday, which is considered the

most significant holiday of the year, is celebrated and how "appropriate" and "inappropriate" communications during the Chinese New Year are linked to the Chinese concept of good and bad luck.

In the fifth grade at Castelar Elementary School in Chinatown, I drew and painted Chinese birds and dragons in celebration of the New Year. As a class we made a 6-foot-long papier-mâché dragon piñata, decorating it with fluffy orange and red tissue paper. Among my vivid memories of this holiday were the popular dragon and lion dances. Firecrackers were set off in front of homes and businesses, a ritual performed to scare away evil spirits so that good luck would abound.

On New Year's Day, I always looked forward to wearing brand new clothes to symbolize a new and fresh beginning. During the New Year celebration and on special happy occasions, it would be common to wear the color red to mean happiness and good luck. I will never forget my parents and relatives' generous gifts of Chinese red envelopes with money enclosed, called *Lei sei*. I had heard that red *Lei sei* were given especially to children so that they would be protected from mythical dragons.

The dragon, along with 11 other animal signs of the Chinese horoscope, is significantly linked to defining each new year. The Chinese horoscope and the new year holiday are based on the lunar calendar year rather than on the Western solar calendar year;

it can begin as early as January 21 or as late as February 19. With each lunar year, according to legend, Buddha summoned all the animals to come to him before he departed from earth.

Each animal reigns throughout its respective year, and each year is influenced by the animal's unique characteristics. For example, February 14, 2010 to February 2, 2011 marks the ruling period of the tiger. The tiger corresponds to the Western astrological sign of Aquarius, which rules from January 21 to February 19. In Eastern culture, the tiger symbolizes power, passion, and daring. The tiger is known to be fearless and a fierce fighter who wards off three dangerous threats to any home: fire, thieves, and ghosts (Lau, 2007).

Moreover, many people who follow the forecast of their Chinese animal signs will find a venue to seek information and advice regarding their luck and fortune for the coming new year, whether it be through a fortune teller or a horoscope book, similar to the Western astrologists. The horoscope followers would be particularly interested in knowing if their animal sign this coming year will bring good luck in terms of getting married, having a child, starting a business, and other inquiries related to their circumstances. The animals ruling the year and the hour the person is born are believed to have a profound influence on one's personality and inquire about how well they will fare in a particular year that is ruled by an animal (Lau, 2007). For instance, a fortune teller will perhaps begin a reading session describing general qualities about the inquirer's animal sign of the tiger, and then proceed to the hour one is born as a horse, and to other finer details of interest during the year of the rabbit.

Only 12 animals came to wish him farewell. As a reward, Buddha named a year after each animal in the order of its arrival. First came the rat, then the ox, the tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, rooster, dog, and boar.

Moreover, the animal ruling the year in which a person is born is believed to have a profound influence on one's personality and life (Lau, 2007). For instance, I was born in the year of the dog and firmly believe that I reflect the qualities of this animal. Generally, people born in the year of the dog are honest, intelligent, and straightforward. They also have a

deep sense of loyalty and a passion for justice, objectivity, and fairness. A dog person is an open-eyed, open-minded observer interested in preserving social goals and guarding the interests of the public at large. The dog is neither materialistic nor ceremonious; he or she prefers plain talk and usually sees through people's motives (Lau, 2007).

In terms of the hour I was born, I also have the qualities of the snake. The snake person is considered the deepest thinker and the enigma of all the Chinese horoscope animals. Also, the snake is known in Chinese culture to be competent and mentally superior, intellectual and philosophical, and someone who rarely seeks or takes advice (Lau, 2007). It is believed that everyone is a combination of qualities from both animals in the year and hour that a person is born. There is more in-depth analysis of a person in Chinese astrology in terms of the season in which a person is born than in the Western astrological sign. For example, I am a Capricorn dog who is likely to be generous and benevolent and tends to be careful and systematic. With the dog's reason and fairness, Capricorn tends to be less stubborn. Most of all, this person will remain true to oneself. If confronted to take a stand on a controversial issue, the Capricorn dog can be sure to be more accurate than kind (Lau, 2007).

In Chinese astrology, compatibility is significant in helping people to understand and decide if a person would make a good match in marriage, business associate, or even a good friend. My experience with Chinese astrology has provided insights that I can observe to help understand the characteristics and qualities that tend to lend potential tendencies that are "hidden in the heart" or in a person's nature. Animals are grouped into triads of most compatible, and every animal has its complete opposite or least compatible person. The dog, tiger, and horse make a harmonious triad who seek to serve humanity, promote universal understanding, and facilitate communication. The rat, monkey, and dragon are most compatible in their triad in which they are doers or performance- and progress-oriented. They are self-starters, ambitious with dynamic energy. Another affinity triad is the ox, snake, and rooster. They are the most purposeful and steadfast signs, dutiful and dedicated fighters who strive to reach great heights with their perseverance and constancy.

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The final triangle of affinity includes the rabbit, sheep, and boar. These three animals are primarily concerned with their senses. They are expressive, intuitive, and eloquent. They tend to be diplomatic and compassionate and this trio is considered to have calmer natures than other signs (Lau, 2007).

In every Chinese community around the world, the ruling animal of that year will be commercially marketed. In a variety of shops, consumers will see an assortment of pictures, sculptures, lanterns, kites, key chains, and so forth—all for celebrators to create an ambiance of the reigning animal and the good luck that it brings.

The words *good luck* and *bad luck* have many meanings to the Chinese people. *Good luck* refers to good hope, health, or wealth, getting good news, and so forth. *Bad luck* means misfortune, loss of money, frustrations in business, evil people, poverty, premature death, sickness, discord, and so on. During the Chinese New Year holiday, my parents and relatives would repeatedly use the Cantonese words /hou² tsoi² /, /hou² men⁶ /, or /hou² wen⁶ /, synonyms meaning *good luck*. *Bad luck* is represented in Cantonese words pronounced as /ng⁴ hou² tsoi² /, /ng⁴ hou² wen⁶ /, and /han⁴ soey¹ wen⁶ /. The beliefs in good and bad luck underlie the use of this language, illustrated by five types of speaking rituals: greetings and wishes, breaking an object, speaking positively, Chinese New Year foods, and prosperity food rhymes (Fong, 2000). Cantonese-speaking Chinese engage in these activities especially during the first 3 days to bring good luck and avoid bad luck throughout the coming year.

One popular greeting is *Gung Hay Fat Choy* ("May you have a happy and prosperous New Year"). This expression is said to bring good luck to both the giver and receiver. Other wishes usually refer to good health, wealth and fortune, abundance, and improvement. Expressions of good wishes are often written on red and gold paper called *fai chun* and attached to walls and doors, offering good fortune, wealth, health, and so forth. Also, the five blessings—old age, wealth, health, love of virtue, and a natural death—are written on *fai chuns*. These blessings are typically written in a poetic style, believed to possess the power to ward off evil influences (Williams, 1976).

The Chinese avoid shattering any objects during the first 3 days of the New Year because this is believed to be a sign of bad luck. However, if an object is shattered by chance, the Chinese use two strategies to counteract the unfortunate incident. One way is to play with words and their meanings by the use of implied statements representing a positive idea. For instance, the unfortunate incident of breaking an object is transformed into a fortunate one when a person uses a positive verbal expression believed to counteract the negative occurrence so that a balance is reestablished. The Chinese expression /lok² dei⁶ hoi¹ fa¹ / means "falling down to the ground, may the flowers blossom." The expression /fu³ wei³ win⁴ wa⁴ / implies becoming prosperous and wealthy. Thus, when an individual drops something and it shatters on the floor, it blossoms up, at which point the person will acquire wealth.

The use of homonyms is another method for converting mishaps into positive events. Broken pieces are translated as /soey³ dzo.² / /Soey³ / sounds the same as another Chinese character, /soey³ /, meaning year. The expression /soey³ soey³ ping⁴ on¹ / means peace in every year, *ping* referring to peace. Hence, broken pieces become peace in every year, and a negative act turns into positive good wishes by using homonyms.

Another luck ritual observed by the Chinese during this holiday is the avoidance of saying anything negative. Everyone is conscious of speaking positively, carefully avoiding any mention of such unlucky topics as death, sickness, or misfortune. It is believed that any negative utterances will bring bad luck in the coming year.

In her observations of a Cantonese-speaking family living in Mississippi, Gong (Chapter 15, this volume) reports that Chinese are highly accommodating during interactions, always courteously yielding on topics whether or not other speakers' comments might be interesting, logical, tasteful, or pertinent. The motive for this accommodating behavior is either to seek approval, demonstrate respect, allow others to perceive that they are respected or even superior to the speaker, or simply not to "make waves." In my own experience with Cantonese-speaking Chinese, however, we are far from accommodating on topics that are negative during the New Year celebration. Strategic

options are quickly used if a speaker does say something negative. This listener might reply, /tou³ heu² soey² dzo³ geng² gwa³/, meaning “spit out your saliva and speak once more.” Other expressions used for this situation include /tsoi¹/ or /tsoi¹ dai⁶ get⁷ lei⁶ si⁶/, which means “you are very lucky or very auspicious.”

A variety of special foods and pastries are prepared especially for the celebration of the Lunar Chinese New Year, and they have a symbolic meaning related to good luck. The phonetic translations of fish, oysters, lettuce, tangerines, kumquats, and other foods possess the same or similar sounds as certain Chinese words that symbolize attributes of good luck. For example, fish is symbolically employed as the emblem of wealth or abundance, on account of the similarity in the pronunciation of the word /yu/ (meaning superfluity) and also because fish are extremely plentiful in Chinese waters (Williams, 1976, p. 185).

Using the international phonetic system, *fish* is /jy/.² A similar sound, /jy/,⁴ means surplus, abundance, or excess. Another example is *oyster*, pronounced in Cantonese as /hou⁴ si/.² A similar pronunciation, is /hou² si/,⁶ which means good things or good business. A dessert called /nin/⁴ /gou/¹ has the same pronunciation, but it can also mean “to grow every year.” The word *tangerine* is pronounced the same as *gold* or /gem/.¹

Jingles and rhymes also ring in the Chinese New Year, adding to a lighthearted atmosphere. One popular food rhyme, related to fish as a favorite and meaningful New Year’s dish, is as follows:

/yau/³ /jy/,⁴ /yau/³ /jy/,⁴
Having fishes, having fishes,
/nin/⁴ /nin/⁴ /yau/³ jy/⁴
Every year, there is excess.

My annual experience of this holiday has enlightened me to the many examples of how spoken and unspoken communicative rituals and their cultural meanings are intertwined with the belief in luck. As a young girl new to the “foreign” world of Chinatown in Los Angeles, I discovered various ways of communicating during the Chinese New Year to avoid bad luck and to increase my good luck. Even today I avoid washing my hair, cleaning the house, sweeping the floor, or taking out the trash on New Year’s Day.

ENDNOTE

1. The international phonetic system is used instead of the transliteration or romanization of Cantonese words. The numbers refer to the nine various tones in the Cantonese language. I would like to thank Ho Shun Yee who provided the phonetic translation of the Cantonese characters. Ms. Ho is presently a doctoral candidate in Chinese language and literature.

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